

to promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which are here in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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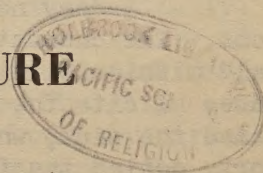
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THE CHURCH AND AGRICULTURE

By Shirley E. Greene*



If we may define a phenomenon as a rare or unusual event, our meeting here is surely such. When a group of busy pastors, busy farmers, and other community workers turn aside for two days and discuss "The Church and Agriculture," we have something unusual enough to rate as a real phenomenon.

All of you know what a church is, I don't need to spend any time explaining that. All of you know very well what agriculture is, for you live in the midst of it. The word that calls for explanation in the title which has been assigned to me is the "and"—it is the "and" which constitutes the phenomenon on this occasion. How shall we justify that conjunction? How can we go about it to show that it is legitimate to tie the "church" and "agriculture" together in one package with that word "and" and make that package the subject of such a conference as this?

Actually, there are three points of view which can be and are held on this subject. One of them I reject utterly; the second I accept without much enthusiasm; the third I subscribe to so wholeheartedly that I have committed my professional life to its implications.

The first of these views--the one which I reject--holds that this is an illegitimate union, that there is no excuse for combining the church and agriculture in such a conference as this. This view is based on what I regard to be a false understanding of the nature of both partners to the union. It assumes that the business of the church lies wholly within a realm which it chooses to define as "spiritual," a realm which in practice however turns out to be a vague, other-worldly, negative sort of region quite unrelated to the life men actually live.

On the other hand, this view makes an equally restricted definition of agriculture. "Agriculture," say some of its proponents, "is a science!" And as a science, of course, it is no business of the church. Everybody knows that science and religion are not proper partners. Indeed, science and religion have commonly been antagonistic to each other. From this point of view, one might

* Opening statement at a two-day conference on "The Church and the Family Farm" held at Yorkville, Tennessee, March 11-12, 1949. Rev. Shirley E. Green is Agricultural Relations Secretary, Council for Social Action, Congregational Christian Churches.

properly call a conference on "Science and Agriculture" or "Agriculture and Technology"--but "The Church and Agriculture," no indeed!

Others in this same school of thought will argue that agriculture is a business--and you know how dangerous it is to try to mix religion in business. As a business, agriculture must comply with the laws of economics, of supply and demand, of efficiency in production. The laws of the moral order may be all very well for the direction of the individual conduct of the farmer, but agriculture is a business.

I deny none of the premises of this group; I deny all of their conclusions. The church's concern is of course spiritual, but I deny that its "spiritual" mission eliminates it from concern with the material bases of human existence. I cite the illustration of our Lord himself who fed the hungry, who healed the sick, who taught his disciples to pray for "daily bread," who, in short, denied the false distinction which this doctrine assumes between the "sacred" and the "secular." To him all of life was sacred, and to the country church it must be so.

Of course, agriculture is a science and should garner all the benefit it can from modern technology. Certainly, agriculture is a business and should be soundly founded in economics and in productive efficiency. But to claim that agriculture is merely a science, or merely a business, or merely both is to miss some of the most important aspects of agriculture in modern life.

Now, for a moment, let us look at the second view concerning the relation between the church and agriculture. This is the view which I accept, but frankly with little enthusiasm. It is the self-interest argument on the part of the church. It runs something like this.

The church is both a divine and a human institution. As a human institution it is forced, regrettably, to meet certain very practical problems, such as paying a preacher's salary, paying the light and heat bill, and keeping a tight roof on a building. All of these items cost money. Money in a rural community is usually made by farmers engaged in agriculture. Therefore, the rural church is forced to be interested in agriculture as a matter of self-preservation.

This is all perfectly true. Studies in certain areas of the South have shown a direct correlation between the condition of the soil and the strength of the country church. Where soil erosion is advanced, churches are relatively weak. In other places, studies have led rural sociologists to assert that when tenancy passes about twenty per cent in a farming community, the community institutions, including the church, begin to suffer from corresponding instability. Many a rural church leader will testify that when farm prices break and chronic depression sets in, as in the period between the wars, the rural church languishes. A significant study in California revealed that the churches are stronger in a community composed of family farms than in a neighboring community composed of large-scale industrialized farms.

Yes, all this is perfectly true, but honestly it doesn't awaken any very ardent, burning enthusiasm in me for a Christian program for agriculture. In fact, I deplore the apparent preoccupation of so many rural church leaders and rural church conferences with this aspect of the problem.

I hasten on, therefore, to the third view of the proper relation of the church to agriculture--a view which I can espouse with enthusiasm. It grants all that has been established before. The country church, and the city church too, is indeed dependent on the stability and prosperity of agriculture for its own welfare. It must surely "seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness" in order that all material considerations shall assume their proper relationships. Agriculture is a science and it is a business--but it is more, much more! It is in this plus that the true justification for the "and" in our conference title is to be found.

Agriculture is also a vocation. I am speaking now theologically. Agriculture is a Christian "calling." We in the ministry have been guilty of a bad and a misleading use of language when we have used the term "full-time Christian service" to refer merely to the ministry, missionary service, Christian education leadership, and the like. Any legitimate human occupation, honestly pursued, can be "full-time Christian service." It is the motive of the man, not the nature of his occupation, that transforms his labor into Christian vocation.

Surely the Christian farmer, producing in abundance for the feeding and clothing of mankind, is following a calling. It is the calling which was expressed by our Lord when he told his hearers that in the day of judgment the basis of separation between sheep and goats would be simply this, "I was hungry and you fed me, naked and you clothed me. Blessed art thou." But to those on the left, "I was hungry and you fed me not, naked and you clothed me not. Depart from me, ye cursed."

The church which proclaims such a Master cannot avoid a responsibility to proclaim also as a primary goal of agricultural policy--both for the individual farmer and for the nation's agricultural program--organized, sustained, and realistic abundance in production for the feeding and clothing of the world's population.

Agriculture is also a stewardship. The farmer is literally fulfilling that ancient insight of the Scripture which says that God at the creation placed man in the earth "to have dominion over it." In the exercise of that dominion, however, he is subject to the fundamental demands of Christian stewardship. The farmer does not have a right to treat the forests and the fields as he pleases, to use and abuse, to slash and waste, to exploit for an immediate profit without regard to the future and to the general welfare. The Christian farmer is restrained and disciplined in his operations by the sure knowledge that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein."

If the church is to be an adequate moral guide to the Christian farmer, it must so interpret the claims of Christian stewardship and so interpret the nature of the agricultural enterprise that the farmer sees the primary relationship between the two and is helped to achieve sound programs of farm management, soil conservation, reforestation, and the like--not merely as good business--but as good Christian stewardship practice.

Agriculture is also a way of life. At various times and in various places farming has been a very bad way of life. It has been a way of poverty, of degradation, of demoralization. Tobacco Road and The Grapes of Wrath told too much truth about certain sectors of American agriculture. In the church of Jesus Christ we follow a Master who was interested in life. He came into the

world, so he said, that men might "have life, and have it more abundantly."

As followers of that gospel, we in the Christian Church must have a concern that farming as a way of life shall be a good way of life. We cannot be content with less than a land-tenure pattern and a farm-income pattern which guarantees to all who labor honestly and efficiently in agriculture a standard of living above the minimum level of subsistence and decency. We will claim for the farmer a standard of food, clothing and shelter, of health, education and recreation, of transportation and communication, of cultural and esthetic and religious opportunity, of security, and of freedom equivalent to that enjoyed by any other comparable vocational group.

Agriculture is also an essential segment in total community. Whether you think in terms of local community, national community, or world community, agriculture is one of the great essential productive segments. Because this is so, agriculture's welfare is bound up with the general welfare. It is also true that, in the nature of our present economy, agriculture finds itself in competition with and in conflict with other economic groups at many points. Such tension as arises from these opposite forces of attraction and antagonism will find their resolution only in a doctrine of justice. The church is interested in justice. It was a cattle breeder and fruit grower named Amos, who, as long ago as eight centuries before Christ, recalled the religious leadership of his day from the pious emptiness of "burnt-offering and whole burnt-offering; solemn feast and ceremony" to a fundamental concern for justice. Amos sensed already in his day the subtle exploitation of the country by the city, which has been the perennial curse of agriculture through the ages until now. He got sick of it. He left his cattle and his fruit trees and came to Bethel to preach. After denouncing, in the name of Jehovah, "your meat-offerings and your peace-offerings; the noise of your songs and the melody of your viols," his eloquent plea was, "Let justice roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream."

This is part of our Judeo-Christian heritage. And the church of the twentieth century also must call for and work for justice as the necessary foundation of stable community life.

"The Church and Agriculture!" No, that title is not a mistake, nor is it a mere concession to the practical necessity of meeting the budget. It is the merging of two of the great creative forces in human life. It is based on a new recognition of some of the great fundamental Christian doctrines--the doctrines of Christian vocation, of Christian stewardship, of abundant living, of justice and community. That "and" is not only a phenomenon; it is an escapable phenomenon. You are going to hear a lot more about it in the days ahead.